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# Islamic Education in a Multicultural Society: The Case of a Muslim School in Canada

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## Abstract

The case study explores the ways in which a prominent, private Canadian Muslim school provides an Islamic education while negotiating its place in an integrated, socially cohesive, multicultural society. The data are derived from an in-depth qualitative investigation utilizing documentary analysis, participant observation, and interviews ( $N = 22$ ). The findings reveal the ways in which the school perceives the specific challenges in negotiating the tension between their aspiration to preserve Islamic values and wider socio-political pressures to integrate into Canada's multicultural society. The study concludes that both the nature of Islamic educational provision and Canadian multicultural policy require modification and change.

*Keywords:* Muslim school, Islamic education, multiculturalism

## **Résumé**

Cette étude explore la façon dont une école privée musulmane canadienne enseigne l'islam, tout en cherchant à s'intégrer avec une cohésion sociale multiculturelle. Les données sont tirées en utilisant une analyse bibliographique, de l'observation des participants et des entretiens ( $N = 22$ ). Les résultats révèlent la façon dont l'école perçoit les défis spécifiques dans la négociation des tensions entre leur souhait de préserver les valeurs islamiques et les fortes pressions socio-politiques pour s'intégrer dans la société canadienne. L'étude conclut que le système d'éducation islamique dans des écoles Islamiques au Canada et la politique multiculturelle canadienne ont besoin de modifications et de changements.

*Mots-clés* : école musulmane, éducation islamique, multiculturalisme

## **Introduction**

Canadians perceive that multiculturalism is an important part of their national identity, and thus there is widespread support for immigration, according to Reitz (2012). As Hall (2000) contends, the term multicultural “describes the social characteristics and problems of governance posed by any society in which different cultural communities live together and attempt to build a common life while retaining some of their original identity” (p. 209). He further states that the term describes “the strategies and policies adopted to govern and manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity which multicultural societies throw up” (p. 209). In the context of education, multiculturalism attempts to equip ethnic and cultural groups with an understanding of, and respect for, the unique cultures of other ethnic groups. It further aims to reduce the discrimination that some minority groups face in schools and in the wider society (Banks, 1994).

Historically, Canada’s federal government has made a firm commitment to multiculturalism, and to promote and encourage integration. In his 1971 speech on multiculturalism, then-Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau outlined practical steps that the federal government would take to support and promote this policy:

1. Resources permitting, the government will seek to assist all Canadian cultural groups that have demonstrated both a desire and effort to continue to develop a capacity to grow and contribute to Canada, and a clear need for assistance, the small and weak groups no less than the strong and highly organized.
2. The government will assist members of all cultural groups to overcome cultural barriers to full participation in Canadian society.
3. The government will promote creative encounters and interchange among all Canadian cultural groups in the interest of national unity.
4. The government will continue to assist immigrants to acquire at least one of Canada’s official languages in order to become full participants in Canadian society. (Adams, 2007, pp. 11–12)

Approved in 1982, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees equal protection, benefit of the law, and freedom from discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, race, or ethnic background. Canada’s Multicultural Act, passed in 1988, further strengthened multiculturalism as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society

by providing a legal avenue to guide the federal government's responsibilities and activities as they relate to multiculturalism. In addition to guaranteeing equal opportunity for all Canadians regardless of origin, it focuses on the rights of people of different ethnicities, races, and religions to preserve their unique cultural heritage. It also underlines the importance of eliminating ethnic and racial discrimination, and requires all federal institutions to implement their programs in a manner that reflects the reality of Canadian society.

The Canadian version of multiculturalism strongly promotes the integration of immigrants into mainstream society (Reitz, 2012). Canadians expect immigrants "to blend into Canadian society and adopt Canadian values and they worry whether this is happening" (p. 58). Canadian policy is "both multiculturalist and integrationist" (p. 58). As the nation comes to terms with rising levels of social pluralism, the discussion around minority rights and integration is increasingly coming to the fore. The tension is particularly acute between the liberal state and those communities "which do not favor or promote individual autonomy, but prefer to see the individual as closely bound within the traditions of the group" (Burtonwood, 2000, pp. 269–270).

International terrorism, particularly al Qaeda's attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, has intensified the debate as it relates to Muslims. According to Khan (2009), since 9/11, prejudices and stereotypes about Muslims, their religious beliefs, or Islamic identities, have become increasingly commonplace in North America. As a consequence, Muslim students must recognize that their beliefs and identities will contribute to the challenges they face in public schools and society in general. Students may experience alienation, marginalization, and a sense of otherness (Khan, 2009). For example, one study reported that 36% of Canadians support banning the hijab (head scarf) in public places, including schools (Adams, 2007). According to Adams (2007), there are two reasons for this negativity surrounding the Islamic female dress code. The first is a perception that the hijab is a symbol of gender inequality and the subordination of women to men according to traditional religious laws. The second reason is that the head scarf promotes loyalty to Islam, and encourages isolation from secular life in Canada. While similar arguments could be made about the outward symbols of other faiths, there is currently a particular focus on Muslims and the Islamic faith (Adams, 2007).

Such perceptions about Islam arguably contradict the values promoted by the Charter of Rights, which ensures equality for all, irrespective of their religious, cultural,

linguistic, and racial backgrounds. Franklin and Brummelen (2006) argue that the multicultural system in Canada is based on a secular/liberal philosophy that often does not accommodate the needs of religious minorities, subjecting Muslims to unfair scrutiny and challenges. Certainly there has been a significant and growing debate about whether certain religious minority values, beliefs, or practices can be integrated with Canadian attitudes toward gender equality or secularism in public institutions (Abu-laban, 1995; Moodood, 2005; Ramadan 2004; Sosal, 1997, as cited in Reitz, Banerjee, Phan, & Thompson, 2009) and the significance of minority religion as a threat to social cohesion (Baramadat & Seljak, 2005; Seljak, 2007, as cited in Reitz, Breton, Dion, & Dion, 2009).

Despite Canada's avowed commitment to multiculturalism, there are continuing concerns about increasing racism and discriminatory treatment in key areas of public welfare provision, evidenced by a growth in Islamophobia (Reitz, 2012). Consequently, Muslim communities are increasingly faced with making hard choices, as first and second generation immigrants seek to negotiate between the cultural values and traditions of their religion and the secularism and potentially hostile attitudes of their host nation.

As Adams (2007) explains:

The disjunction between how Muslims view their own desire to integrate and how other Canadians view it is pronounced: while Muslims see themselves as wanting to participate in and adapt to Canadian society, the population at large tends to doubt this willingness. It's precisely the underlying anxiety about minority religious groups' willingness to integrate that infuses more superficial debates (such as those about clothing) with such passion and fear. (p. 95)

The nature and role of private Muslim schools goes to the heart of the debate. While independent of the public school system, Islamic schools are supported, both politically and financially, by the provincial governments. An Islamic education principally focuses on two main domains: individual development and social development. In individual development, education strives to provide students with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in life as adults in this world, and to achieve positive rewards in the hereafter. In social development, education focuses on enhancing the Muslim community's collective identity and preserving its cultural heritage as an agent for social change (Halstead, 2004). Proponents of Islamic schools believe such schools promote particular cultures and religions that aim at moving the experiences of their students to the core

of educational discussion rather than remaining marginalized (Ameli, Azam, & Merali, 2005). In addition, it is argued that faith-based schools improve rather than hinder social harmony in a multicultural society, because they allow cultural and religious communities to maintain their specific religions and cultures (Ameli et al., 2005; Thessen, 2001). Opponents consider religious education such as Islamic education to be a rejection of liberal democratic values, deliberately intended to isolate students from the wider society, promoting a separatist cultural heritage that also limits students' opportunity to engage in an open dialogue and critical thinking (Gutmann, 1996; McKinney, 2006; Sweet, 1997).

Our study explores the ways in which the Canadian Muslim School provides an Islamic education program in accordance with the Canadian goal of creating an integrated, socially cohesive, multicultural society.

## **The Case Study Investigation**

The ethnographically informed case study research was undertaken over a three-year period in one Muslim school, which we have called the Canadian Muslim School. A Muslim association founded the school in 1983. Originally established as a private co-educational Muslim elementary school, it is now one of the most highly regarded Canadian Muslim Schools in North America, serving about 300 Muslim students from Kindergarten through Grade 7. These students come from diverse ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, and represent approximately 20 different nationalities and at least 30 linguistic groups.

In terms of funding, the school depends on tuition fees collected from parents. It also depends on fundraising and public donations from well-wishers within the wider Muslim community. In addition, the school receives 50% of the funds granted to public (government) schools in the province. There are 15 academic teachers (teaching the government curriculum) and four religious teachers. According to the parents' handbook, the aim of the school is to produce Muslims of character who are able to excel academically, physically, and spiritually. The objectives of the school are:

- To provide the basics of Islam for students.
- To prepare students to adopt Islam as a way of life.

- To help students become contributing members of the Muslim community in particular and Canadian society in general.
- To help students develop good Islamic qualities and manners.
- To provide students with a solid Islamic education program that helps them to develop balanced and progressive minds.

The Canadian Muslim School, in line with other independent schools, has the freedom to address the curriculum from their own religious, cultural, philosophical, or pedagogical perspectives. The Islamic education program is not integrated with the wider academic curriculum; rather, it remains separate, focusing on a range of religious issues related to the beliefs and practical aspects of Islam, such as those related to Islamic manners.

The study is based on prolonged fieldwork immersion within the Canadian Muslim School over a period of three years. The data subsequently generated and reported in this article is derived ethnographically from a range of methods, including documentary analysis (Aronson, 1994; Braun & Clarke, 2006) encompassing school handbooks, teaching material, and curricular guidelines; participant observation in formal and informal settings, such as specific Islamic education classes, the school staff room, and school grounds (a fieldwork diary was used to record observations); and semi-structured audio-taped interviews of between 30 minutes and one hour's duration conducted on multiple occasions with key groups, including school staff, parents, students, the school principal, and chair of the school board ( $N = 22$ ). The interviews, while focused on ascertaining perceptions concerning the nature and delivery of Islamic education within the school, Islamic identity, and Canadian multiculturalism, nevertheless sought to be open-ended, enabling interviewees to express their views widely and freely. The students interviewed were both male and female in Grades 6 and 7, and were all first generation Canadian Muslims from a range of origins, including Pakistan, Syria, Ethiopia, and Fiji. The teachers interviewed were all male immigrants from Iraq, Egypt, and Scotland. The male principal was an immigrant from Somalia. The male chair of the school board was an immigrant from Sudan. The parents interviewed were all male, due to availability and access, who had immigrated to Canada from Ethiopia, Pakistan, and Libya.

In analytical terms, the in-depth study sought to uncover the qualitative nature of the Islamic education provided by the school, and was conducted using the grounded



theory approach as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990): one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study, and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23). This paradigmatic position shares common ground with our critical realist perspective adopted from the ideas of Danermark, Ekstroem, Jacobsen, and Karlsson (2002), as well as Maxwell (2012); the key defining characteristic for critical realism being a combination of realist ontology and interpretive epistemology, the explanation of events relying on the interactions between mechanism, structure, and conditions (Sayer, 2000). In analytical terms, the research thus utilized a methodology of concurrent, iterative cycles of data collection and analysis in a manner consistent with a grounded theory research approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), narrowing codes from interview transcripts into broad conceptual categories through a process of analytical abstraction.

In the following section we address three key emergent themes from the data in relation to both understanding Islamic education and the school's interaction with wider Canadian society, namely, teaching the principles of Islam; strengthening Islamic identity and culture; and engaging with multiculturalism. We subsequently conclude by reflecting on these findings and their implications for the development of a socially integrated, multicultural Canadian society.

## **Teaching the Principles of Islam**

The interviewees perceived the primary purpose of an Islamic education at the Canadian Muslim School to be to teach students the basic principles of Islam, and to provide the necessary skills and knowledge to adopt Islam as a way of life. As one teacher at the school described the program:

We teach students the principles of how to worship Allah, and who is God? Who is his Prophet, and how you practice what you learn about your religion on a daily basis. We try to infuse what we learn in our actions. We also teach them about the Creator, and why they were created on this earth, and how to practice the religion and how to worship God. The Islamic studies education is organized to

teach students the basics of Islam. It starts teaching from the basic supplications (du'as) to the five pillars of Islam, and when they do them in congregation with other Muslim students, they feel that they are not alone. And this is part of who they are. And they get training and exercise and gaining the habits of, I could say, a Muslim way of life. (Teacher, Islamic education)

The pillars of Islam are as follows: to believe in one God (Allah), to perform the five daily prayers, to pay zakah (that is, paying 2.5% of your annual savings for a good cause), to fast during Ramadan (the 9th month of the Islamic calendar), and to go for Hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca once in a lifetime for those who have the physical and financial abilities to do so. Believing in, and acting upon, the pillars of Islam is obligatory for adult Muslims. According to the chair of the school board, "The Islamic education curriculum is the core upon which the rest of the curriculum is based. The objective is to instill in children the values of Islam, to give them an understanding of Islam...and to give them the tools to apply their religion in their life, and to be able to succeed as Muslims in Western societies."

This viewpoint was echoed by students, as the following male student comment reveals:

I think it's good to learn Islamic studies now so that when I am older I can use it in life. Let us say I had not studied Islamic studies and had non-Muslim friends and they do something haram (forbidden). I would go along with it. In Islamic studies classes we learn about the Prophet (Mohammed), and the Qur'an, how Allah gave the Qu'ran, and about Islamic manners and how should we behave.

The parents agree. As one parent reported, "I send my children to the school because the school provides a very good basic knowledge and information about Islam. It produces graduates who are Muslims who understand their faith."

In line with the guidelines for the school's Islamic education, all interviewees agreed that they wanted the students to learn internal religious issues, such as the basic principles of Islam and Islamic practice, and to develop not simply a sense of belonging but the religious and social tools to resist external immoral influences. In other words, the interviewees wanted the Islamic education program at the Canadian Muslim School to

prepare students with a strong belief system that will shape their personalities and enhance their confidence in adopting Islam as a way of life.

These views reaffirm the ways in which the Islamic worldview applies to all aspects of life in order to strengthen faith, shape personality, and gain the pleasure of Allah in this world and in the hereafter (Halstead, 2004; Maududi, 1988). Islamic education focuses on establishing an ideological community (ummah) with principles based on the teaching of the Qur'an and the tradition of Prophet Muhammad (Halstead, 2004). These elements establish not only the spiritual and ethical guidelines but also make Islam a primary source of identity for its followers. The ideals of Islam are to provide cohesion and solidarity, which enable its members to establish common institutions such as mosques and schools (Halstead, 2004). Moreover, Islamic education aims at achieving a state of spiritual and ethical nurturing that is in accordance with the will of the Ar-Rab (The Lord) (Ibn Manzur, 2000). Consequently, the task of Islamic education is to provide "the vivid presentation of high values and continued exposure to the attraction of goodness, truth and honesty until they are woven into the fabric of personality" (Hajalton, 1982, p. 59).

Islamic education focuses both on training the mind and passing on knowledge to others, as well as educating the person as a whole (Asharaf & Husain, 1979; Henzell-Thomas, 2002). Both kinds of knowledge contribute to the strengthening of faith (iman). Islamic education and the teaching of Islamic principles as exemplified by the Canadian Muslim School were linked by all respondents to the strengthening of Islamic identity and the cultural heritage of its students.

### **Strengthening Islamic Identity and Cultural Practice**

The strengthening of Islamic identity and culture of students is an important component of the school's religious education program. According to interviewees, the program helps students to enhance and maintain their identity and self-esteem in practising Islam, particularly in Western society. As the chair of the school board observed, the purpose of the program is "to instill in children the values of Islam, and give them an understanding of such values that will help them be at peace with their identity as Muslims, especially in the West." Similarly, according to the school principal, the aims of Islamic education at the Canadian Muslim School include "promoting Islamic teachings and

values, maintaining Islamic identity and heritage, and fostering Islamic worldview and understanding.”

A dominant perception among the respondents was that the Canadian Muslim School doesn't simply help engender, strengthen, and craft an Islamic identity but helps it to flourish and persevere by providing a safe and protected space (in comparison to more public spaces) in which students can express this identity and practice their faith. As one female student remarked:

At the school, performing prayer and wearing the hijab is very simple because everyone is doing it. During prayer time for example, everyone is doing the same thing. But it's...difficult in public places to pray. Some young people may be concerned about losing friends, or being pressured sometimes, that is why they do not practice Islam sometimes. Some people are not going to be too nice to you, I know that for sure. Going to school I know that I am going to be able to do prayer...so it's much easier.

As one Islamic education teacher observed, it is easier to practise Islam at the Canadian Muslim School because you do not have to explain yourself all the time to others. He continued:

Prayer time, for example, you are in Islamic environment. Also, you do not have to explain why you wear the hijab, perform prayer, and fast in the month of Ramadan. There are some challenges with practising Islam in public, especially, the dress code for women, due to ignorance from the part of some people in the public.

These findings are echoed in other studies that similarly verify how Islamic schools help their students maintain the identity and heritage of their community (um-mah), and express and practise their faith (Halstead, 2004; Lemo, 2003), which explains why many Muslim parents choose to send their children to Islamic rather than public schools (Merry, 2005). Research shows Muslim parents want schools to be friendly and open to issues of gender sensitivity, such as modest dress (e.g., the hijab), provide sanctioned food (halal), provide provisions for prayer, and teach character. Other interviewees echoed similar thoughts regarding the importance of the Islamic identity and cultural heritage. As one male student commented:

If Muslims from other countries come and they go to public school they might lose what they learned before, and their Islamic culture. But when we have a Muslim school like this one, they will learn more and be more confident about their culture. So, we can be prouder, not feeling as though we have to hide anything.

Female students encounter particular difficulties. As this female student confided:

When we go out we face some challenges, especially with the hijab. Some people reject it, and tell us to go back home if you want to cover your head/body. The society is harsh on us sometimes in different ways. It's a challenge to build confidence.

According to Khan (2009), polls indicate that 37% of Canadians hold a negative view of Islam, and 21% of them mention the treatment of women as the basis for their views, and cite the hijab as a sign of such oppression (Khan, 2009). One of the common stereotypes about Muslims, which has worsened since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, is that Muslims' values are not compatible with Westerners' values (Khan, 2009). Moreover, as Merry (2005) indicates, many Muslim students in the public system face particular cultural challenges, such as the ones mentioned above, in addition to concerns about consuming alcohol and premarital relations. It is due to such cultural challenges that Muslim communities in Canada, including those parents who have selected to send their children to the Canadian Muslim School, seek to protect their children from the perceived negative outside influences of the dominant culture (Zine, 2007). This viewpoint is exemplified by the following parent's comments:

When I sent my daughter to a (non-Muslim) preschool there was some kind of peer pressure on her about some cultural practices that I did not agree with in principle such as celebrating Halloween, Valentine's Day, and Christmas, which do not match my religion and culture. Therefore, I do not want my children to celebrate nonsense holidays, like Halloween. I do not see it as a principled celebration, same with Valentine's Day. I also did not want them to be under pressure from the majority of the community, because the majority is non-Muslims. First of all they are Muslims and then they are Canadians. I have no problem interacting with the outside community, but the Islamic identity has to be preserved, and

it's really important, especially in the early ages. So, if I put them in a Muslim school, there will be no social pressure on them.

In line with the findings of Zine (2007), our study found that parents, teachers, and governors of the Canadian Muslim School, while seeking to maintain their Islamic culture and identity, equally expressed a desire for their students to be able to integrate positively with the wider society. The mechanism by which they believed this would happen, however, was grounded not in any broader commitment to multiculturalism or the delivery of a multicultural curriculum but in the teachings of Islam and the social relationships engendered through the diverse ethnic backgrounds of the Muslim pupils within the school.

### **Engaging Multiculturalism**

The overwhelming majority of students in the Canadian Muslim School were born to Muslim families in Canada, and call Canada their home. For all intents and purposes they are both Muslim and Canadian. In this context there is an argument to be made for a balanced curricular approach that fosters these multiple identities, enhancing the students' skills and knowledge of diverse religious, cultural, and ethnic groups, while strengthening their Islamic beliefs and identity within an atmosphere of respect for, and trust in, the principles of Canadian multiculturalism (Lee, 2002). Significantly, an analysis of the Canadian Muslim School's curriculum provides very little evidence of how the Islamic education program promotes respect for non-Muslims, or provides the necessary skills and knowledge for students to respect non-Muslim beliefs and cultural systems. The program appears to take quite a narrow approach to developing multicultural competence, mainly focusing on the Muslim community and issues that concern its members (Abdul-Aziz, 1992; Emerick, 1998, 2000; Philips, 1997).

The main aim of the curriculum is to promote the basic principles of Islam, encouraging students to adopt Islam as a way of life while in a friendly environment, and to enhance their Islamic identity and cultural heritage. In essence, the school instills qualities that help students gain the blessings of Allah in this world and in the hereafter. The ethical teachings, called the Islamic code of conduct, aim to develop positive attitudes, skills, and knowledge that will strengthen the students' Islamic identity and belief system. The code covers topics such as obedience to parents, respecting elders, treating guests

well, safeguarding the rights of neighbours, being honest and truthful with all, showing kindness to children, helping the poor and the needy, and showing respect for all. It also deals with negative social issues such as suspicion, backbiting, slandering, gossip, jealousy, unfairness, discrimination, and cheating.

Arguably, the Islamic components of the curriculum and the values they expound strengthen students' Islamic identity and cultural heritage while encouraging a wider respect and better understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims. As Parekh (2003) suggests, Muslims in general respect many Western and other universal values (p. 1). Certainly, this was the view we identified within the Canadian Muslim School, in which Islamic education was perceived to be in alignment with multiculturalism. As an Islamic education teacher explained:

There is no contradiction between their education and multiculturalism in Canada. Islam teaches how to treat others and how to respect them. To put it in the simplest terms, we teach students about their culture and their background, where they came from. We also teach them morals, how to live and how to be productive in society, to be good members of society, to contribute, to better themselves as human beings as best as they can, because that is what Islam teaches us. And then, they have to be the best for the people around them, and of course further from their school community to the bigger community, to all of Canada and to the whole world.

The chair of the school board similarly observes, "The curriculum enhances the idea of multiculturalism and coexistence, which is by nature the teachings of Islam, that is, the belief that God created humanity as one." This is in line with the position of Islam, which encourages its followers to interact with their respective wider societies and to contribute to the improvement of such societies (Maududi, 1988).

As for multiculturalism, the study's participants made the point that while all the students in the school were Muslims, they come from many different racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, and are thus exposed at a young age to diversity and multiculturalism. This exposure, they believe, facilitates the students' positive integration within Canadian society and mitigates the need for any direct non-Islamic-informed engagement with Canadian multicultural ideals and principles. As the chair of the school board observed:

Even if we teach our curriculum without reference to the Canadian context, the students will still find the Canadian experience something they can fit into because they have lived it in the school, where you will find students with Chinese background, or Somali background, or Arab background, or Middle Eastern background, or European. When these students interact they really interact as Muslims. They probably speak their mother tongues, they have their choices and preferences in terms of food and dress, and especially, during Eid (religious festival) we see that diversity. But they are grounded by faith.

As an Islamic education teacher similarly remarked:

There is harmony between teaching Islamic education at the school and Canadian multiculturalism. Muslim students do not need to be taught about multiculturalism, because they live multiculturalism as they are from all over the world and [there is] no contradiction between Islamic education and multiculturalism. We teach students Islamic manners and behavior on a daily basis. We do not specifically teach students about other cultures, we just talk about them in general. We come from different cultures but we are all the same as Muslims. So, there is no difference in your background if you have the same religion. So we treat each other as equals, as brothers and sisters in one unity. But with other cultures, we have to treat them fairly, and it is their choice and we do not offend them if their religion is different than us.

The Canadian Muslim School's ethnically diverse population was also referred to in the context of isolationism. As an Islamic education teacher commented:

Islamic education at the Canadian Muslim School does not encourage isolation. On the contrary, Islamic education never encourages isolation. Muslims consist of many cultures. Many people, many languages as well as many different religions lived together in harmony under Islamic states. Islamic history teaches us tolerance and accepting others.

It can certainly be argued that the Canadian Muslim School provides access to people from different geographical regions and ethnic backgrounds, and that this access provides insights not available in a more homogenous setting. Nevertheless, all the



students at the Canadian Muslim School are Muslims, and interacting with individuals who share your beliefs and faith is arguably markedly different from interacting with non-Muslims in a wider Canadian context. It thus raises the question, is it enough, as our respondents believe, to teach Islamic moral values and manners in an ethnically diverse but Islamic context in order to develop a true multicultural competence? Is an Islamic education sufficient to educate citizens about interacting with people of different backgrounds and living in a multicultural society (Kubow, Grossman, & Ninomiya, 2000, p. 131)?

## **Conclusions**

Canada's multiculturalism has tended to focus on issues related to public institutions and addressing the needs of secular ethnic minority groups, especially from Europe, rather than seeking to accommodate the aspirations and needs of ideologically motivated, diverse religious minorities. As a consequence, certain religious minorities, including Muslims, feel current Canadian educational policies and institutional practices marginalize their values, beliefs, language, and history, while simultaneously privileging the majority's (Azmi, 2001; Kymlicka, 2001; Zine, 2007). Moreover—and more specifically, post-9/11—Muslims in Canada have increasingly found themselves becoming victims of hostility, racism, and Islamophobia. It is perhaps no coincidence that in such an environment there has been a marked increase in the number of Islamic schools being established in the West (Merry, 2007); an increase which could be due to a demographic change in the number of school-age Muslims, but also very likely reflects wider Muslim concerns over their position as a minority group within non-Muslim societies (Shah, 2012).

Similarly, the Canadian Muslim School in our study perceives itself to be at the forefront of creating a safe environment, free from racial and religious prejudice and discrimination, and from negative non-Islamic influences in the public schools and society at large. Consequently, Islamic schools, such as the Canadian Muslim School, are seen as a means of both providing students with direct access to knowledge of Islam and promoting “a sense of Muslim identity in a time of political targeting, social polarization and economic marginalization” (Shah, 2012, p. 58). In theory, Islam education advocates that students develop the necessary skills and knowledge for personal growth, autonomy,

and freedom. It also encourages young Muslims to express themselves, to become critical thinkers, question ideas and concepts, and engage in debate in a supportive environment. However, in practice, students in Islamic education classes in the West are often encouraged to be good listeners and respectful of what they are told, without any critical thinking (Ramadan, 2004). Because the key aspiration of Muslim communities in the West is largely to preserve the values and identity of Islam for their children (Ramadan, 2004), this mission is emphasized in Islamic schools. Consequently, there is a potential imbalance between maintaining Islamic fundamentals and providing students with the necessary knowledge and skills to reconcile any tensions that may exist between their religious and national identity.

In our study we found that all of the interviewees want the Islamic education program to focus on the basic principles of Islam, such as the five pillars of Islam, the belief in Allah, the revealed books, and the prophets, to prepare students to be good practising Muslims who adopt Islam as a way of life. It is believed that through the development of a strong understanding of the principles of Islam and the development of a clear Islamic identity in the context of an ethnically diverse Canadian Muslim School community, students will be equipped to take a positive role in Canadian multicultural society, in which multiculturalism and Islam share universal values such as respecting others, honesty, fairness, and justice.

It could equally be argued, however, that this is a rather narrow point of view, promoting only a low level, indirect form of multicultural competence (Ghosh, 2004), with the Canadian Muslim School unable to provide its students with the skills and knowledge necessary to develop a respect for diversity, or to readily integrate into a multicultural society. Arguably, the current curriculum and teaching methodology of Islamic education at the Canadian Muslim School, in accordance with the research of Ramadan (2004) on Islamic education in the West, does not equip students to face the challenges posed by their societies. Ramadan argues that a close examination of the Islamic education curriculum in the West indicates that it focuses on protecting students from the perceived negative influence of the West by isolating them from non-Muslims and non-Islamic traditions. As a result, curricula, such as that offered by the Canadian Muslim School, tend to focus on the technical ability of students to memorize verses from the Qur'an, follow prophetic traditions, and embody Islamic values, while insufficiently addressing or completely ignoring fundamental aspects of North American society (Ramadan, 2004). In this regard,

Islamic education is geared to students as if they were living in a predominantly Islamic state rather than in a society in which the Muslim community constitutes a minority.

In attempting to counter this view, Ramadan (2004) provides a useful model for curriculum development that he locates around three key educational principles: *education of the heart*, *education of the mind*, and *education for personal growth* (p. 128). In relation to the *education of the heart*, the focus is on strengthening the students' belief system as well as their understanding and awareness of their responsibilities, not simply to themselves but also to their relatives, their communities, and their humanity. The aim in *education of the mind* is to increase students' understanding of the main messages and meanings of the Qur'an and the teachings of Prophet Mohammed in order to lead a life in accordance with these sources, worshipping God (Allah) alone, and achieving success in this world and in the hereafter. The third principle, *education for personal growth*, is to enable students to develop the necessary skills and knowledge to become autonomous in their lives and their choices. Importantly, given our findings, Ramadan (2004) believes that studies of the Qur'an, traditions of the Prophet (ahadith), law, and jurisprudence need to take into consideration the environment and the context in which such learning takes place. Crucially, in order for students to achieve the goal of independent thinking, the Islamic curriculum in the West should provide a body of teaching that encourages a sense of Islamic identity through religious scholarly teaching, prayer, and observances such as fasting, and through interacting with teachers, other students, and the wider society.

Currently, Islamic education in the West has a tendency, either explicitly or implicitly, to emphasize to students the differences between the Islamic worldview and the host society rather than assisting them to find a balance between their Islamic identity and loyalty to their respective nations (Ramadan, 2004). For example, in the case of the Canadian Muslim School, rather than encouraging students to reject popular practices such as celebrating Christmas, Halloween, and Valentine's Day, it might be more reasonable to help them understand and recognize that other cultures and beliefs are as important as their own to the people who hold them. The students at the Canadian Muslim School need to develop the skills and knowledge to interact positively with the wider non-Muslim Canadian society, to learn about the cultures and beliefs of diverse communities, and to be exposed to different perspectives and cultures (Ghosh, 2004). Such an open-minded approach toward other cultures may help these students develop the necessary skills and knowledge for multicultural competence (Esses & Gardner, 2006). In essence, Islamic

education needs to be flexible and reflective of the reality of Western societies, and needs to challenge students to balance their faith and identity within their respective multicultural societies. Such balance requires openness and also courage in critically questioning and discussing different viewpoints (Ramadan, 2004).

Islamic education programs such as those at the Canadian Muslim School should, wherever necessary, expand the concept of respect to include non-Muslims' beliefs and cultures, and define good Islamic practices to include good citizenship in the context of Canada's multicultural society. Such a curriculum should be taught within the context of Canada's multicultural society by locally trained teachers who are well versed in modern teaching pedagogies. Memon (2011), in reflecting on the identity crisis that Muslim youth post-9/11 are experiencing, considers that part of the solution may reside not so much with the "pedagogical tradition of Islam but rather the need for Islamic schools, and their teacher training initiatives, to recognize the ways in which contemporary educational approaches can contribute to building student self-esteem and non-Islamic theories and approaches can "contribute to the development of Islamic schools" (p. 296).

In the same way that Konstant (1991) has argued in relation to separate Catholic schools and Short (2002) on Jewish schools, Islamic schools with an appropriate curriculum are not necessarily socially divisive, but on the contrary may help to facilitate social cohesion making "critical contributions towards the promotion and sustaining of those values that are essential for building, maintaining and safeguarding cohesive communities" (Billings & Holden, 2007, p. 10). As Merry (2015) states:

Separate religious schools that consciously facilitate enabling conditions may enhance educational quality to the extent that schools facilitate the fostering of self-respect, and demonstrate equality of recognition and treatment of pupils, who, not incidentally, are less likely to receive this treatment in another school environment (Agirdag, Demanet, Van Houtte, & Van Avermaet, 2011; Terry, Flenbaugh, Blackmon, & Howard, 2014). Separation may also enhance a child's education to the extent that virtues can—arguably more efficiently—be cultivated within a homogenous environment, and these virtues potentially have civic import inasmuch as they can contribute to the good of one's community and beyond. (p. 147)

Equally, Canada's public schools, government agencies, and media outlets should develop policies aimed at challenging Islamophobia, and present Islam from a

perspective of peace and social justice, not from the negative images that present Islam as a religion based on extremism (Zine, 2004). According to Nye (2007), what is required is a meaningful dialogue in multicultural societies such as Canada, whereby a concerted and systematic effort is made to acknowledge the existence of differences, gain knowledge of those differences, and promote tolerance and engagement between and across those differences; a two-way process in which all participants must observe, learn about, and tolerate each other's cultures. In this sense, those in the majority as well as the minority must respect and tolerate religious or social practices, ideas, and values, some of which they may not find agreeable. Successful multiculturalism and cultural engagement requires mutual tolerance for diversity, as well as agreeing to a common ground that unites the different groups within any multicultural setting. Thinking positively and becoming more accommodating when faced with differences can lead to, as Bauman (2002) suggests in Shah (2012, p. 61), "new ways to re-forge human diversity into human solidarity." Arguably, the existence of Islamic schools within Canada's multicultural education system could prove to be one of those new ways to build a more cohesive, mutually tolerant, respectful society.

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